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Matters arising from the 2015 session of Economic Commission for Europe and the 46th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission

Matters arising from the 2015 session of the Economic Commission for Europe

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

The note presents the outcome of the sixty-sixth session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, held from 14 to 16 April 2015 in Geneva. It focuses on the discussions and decisions of the Commission that have a bearing on the work of the Conference of European Statisticians. The note reflects the discussions during the high-level dialogue "Committing to action on sustainable development in times of change" and the related thematic panel discussion on measuring and monitoring sustainable development.

The note is submitted to the Conference of European Statisticians for information.

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I. Introduction

1. The document presents the outcome of the sixty-sixth session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), held from 14 to 16 April 2015. The Commission session is held every second year. The Commission is a parent body of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES).

2. The sixty-fifth session was attended by representatives from Albania, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Uzbekistan. The representatives of the European Union and several United Nations organizations and other international organizations also attended.

3. The agenda of the Commission session included the following main topics:

(a) High-level dialogue on committing to action on sustainable development in times of change;

(b) High-level thematic discussions (five thematic discussions took place, one of these focused on measuring and monitoring sustainable development);

(c) Discussion and endorsement of a high-level statement on the post-2015 development agenda and expected sustainable development goals;

(d) Progress in the implementation of the outcome of the review of the 2005 reform of ECE.

4. The agenda items (a) to (c) have a particular relevance for the CES work. The full report of the Commission session will be available at: www.unece.org/info/about-unece/commissionindex/index.html

II. High-level statement on the post-2015 development agenda and expected sustainable development goals

5. The ECE session endorsed a high-level statement on the post-2015 development agenda and expected sustainable development goals (SDGs) in the ECE region (E/ECE/1475). With regard to statistics, the statement notes that "ECE is ideally placed to continue to make a strong contribution to sustainable development by", among other issues, "contributing to an effective framework to measure and monitor sustainable development by developing high-quality data and modern statistical production building on the more than 20 statistical standards, recommendations and guidelines adopted by the Conference of European Statisticians, including work on measuring poverty, demographic changes and gender equality issues, and recommendations to measure sustainable development that help national statistical offices to produce and analyse data. The ECE environmental performance reviews are a valuable and well recognized monitoring mechanism. This experience can contribute toward an effective framework for monitoring and accountability." The full text of the high-level statement is provided as Annex I.

III. High-level dialogue on committing to action on sustainable development in times of change

6. This section presents a summary of key discussions and conclusions of the high-level dialogue in areas that relate to the CES work. The following persons participated in the high-level dialogue: Mr. Gennady Gatilov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation; Mr. Serdar Atayev, Deputy Minister of Economy and Development, Turkmenistan; Ms. Nerissa J. Cook, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Organization Affairs, Department of State, United States; Mr. Nicholas Hanley, Acting Director, Directorate-General for the Environment, European Commission; Mr. Mahmud Mammad-Guliyev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Azerbaijan and Mr. Thomas Fitschen, Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Representative of Germany.

7. Ms. Cook, United States, stressed that UNECE is well placed to play an important role as a regional platform to support the SDGs implementation, including by setting standards and conducting regional performance reviews. Monitoring progress across countries will be critical and should be done on the basis of what already exists to avoid duplications. Regionally-based monitoring also provides another layer of accountability and credibility and UNECE has a positive track record on monitoring the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which can be capitalized on for the SDGs. It is also important to strengthen linkages with the other Regional Commissions and international organizations, as it is being done with FAO, while seeking to avoid duplication. The experience of UNECE in capacity-building in statistics could be shared with other regions and could serve as a broader model for other Regional Commissions. UNECE also has a role to play to integrate the private sector in a more robust way, which is essential to meet the SDGs.

8. The Commission noted that monitoring and review of the post-2015 agenda should be based on existing instruments, which need to be linked in order to avoid duplications. One proposal was to consider a meeting of all Bureaux of UNECE legal instruments to discuss related issues. Existing data and analytical activities of United Nations organizations should also be better connected.

9. Forging partnerships with civil society, the private sector and other United Nations and regional organizations is essential to engage all stakeholders in achieving change. The process of strengthening the involvement of civil society and the private sector in domestic and international policy-making should therefore be continued. Non-state actors should also be involved in the post-2015 monitoring and review mechanism at the national, regional and global levels. This will enhance the depth and credibility of such mechanisms.

10. The high-level dialogue concluded that UNECE is well placed to play a leading role for the implementation of the SDGs in its areas of expertise in the region and beyond. Effective data and monitoring systems are important drivers for the implementation of sustainable development, to which UNECE will continue to contribute.

IV. High-level thematic discussions

11. Five high-level thematic discussions were held, focusing on the following topics:

(a) Sustainable energy and resilient communities;

(b) Sustainable management of ecosystems and natural resources;

(c) Connectivity and competitiveness for sustainable lives;

(d) Measuring and monitoring sustainable development;

(e) Partnering for sustainable development.

12. This section provides an extract of discussions during the panel (b) that relate to CES work, and reflects fully the discussions of the panel (d) as they have direct implications to the CES work.

Panel B. Sustainable management of ecosystems and natural resources

13. During the panel discussions, Ms. Victoria Elias, Programme Director, World Wide Fund for Nature, Russian Federation, noted that UNECE could serve as a regional forum where all issues related to SDGs could be openly discussed. The Conference of European Statisticians will also help to ensure that the indicators are developed in a smart way. Ms. Elias listed areas where UNECE should become involved and lead the way, including the evaluation of ecosystem services and the development of smart indicators for the implementation of SDGs in the region.

Panel D. Measuring and monitoring sustainable development

14. The panel was moderated by Mr. Roderick van Schreven, Ambassador of the Netherlands to the United Nations and the World Trade Organization in Geneva. The following persons were on the panel:

- Mr. Enrico Giovannini, Professor, Co-Chair of the Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on Data Revolution for Sustainable Development,
- Ms. Vanessa Lawrence, Co-Chair of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management,
- Mr. Padraig Dalton, Chief Statistician, Ireland, and Chair of the ECE High-level Group on Modernization of statistical production,
- Mr. Peder Jensen, Head of Programme, European Environment Agency,
- Mr. Adonis F. Velegrakis, Professor, School of Environment, University of the Aegean, Greece

15. Mr. Giovannini noted that statistics is at the core of the post-2015 agenda and SDGs. The framework for measuring sustainable development prepared jointly by UNECE, Eurostat and OECD has contributed substantially to the current process of establishing a monitoring framework and indicators for SDGs. A revolution is needed in the way data are produced to be able to measure and monitor SDGs. Timeliness is one of the biggest challenges. The data cycle has to be aligned with the decision cycle to allow taking informed decisions. Another challenge is providing data for new areas which have traditionally not been part of official statistics, such as governance, peace and security. Mr. Giovannini asked for UNECE to play a leading role in providing data for monitoring SDGs, integrating data from countries, and in modernising statistical production processes. He urged to rethink the current silo approach to producing and using data in decision-making to be in accordance with the cross-cutting nature of sustainable development.

16. Ms. Lawrence discussed what UNECE and its member countries can do to advance the work on using new data sources through the integration of geospatial and statistical information. She underlined the value of geo-spatial information in the context of Big Data and the data revolution for sustainable development, given that all events are linked to a location. She gave examples of how geospatial information is providing value by helping public authorities and the private sector to deliver services much more efficiently. The importance of geospatial information has been recognized at the global level by ECOSOC, when it established the UN-GGIM initiative in 2011. Ms. Lawrence stressed the importance of anchoring this work at the Regional Commissions, proposing that UNECE should

provide the secretariat for UN-GGIM:Europe, as the other Regional Commissions are already doing for equivalent groups in their regions. The geo-spatial dimension underpins activities in many UNECE work programmes, particularly in the context of SDGs. She concluded that geospatial information will be an important part of the evidence base for monitoring SDGs. The UNECE Secretariat can play an important role in supporting this work in the UNECE region.

17. Mr. Dalton discussed how innovations in official statistics can support the post-2015 development agenda. He considered how UNECE can facilitate greater collaboration to more effectively meet the challenges of the "Data Revolution". He emphasized the global role of the UNECE High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Statistical Production and Services in coordinating modernisation activities in national and international statistical organizations by focusing on demand-driven priorities and producing tangible outputs. There is a need for national and international statistical organizations to collaborate within the "Statistical Modernisation Community", as the challenges of developing new data sources, processes and products are too big for individual organizations to face alone. He referred to the critical role of UNECE in coordinating these activities and facilitating an open and inclusive environment for collaboration. The challenge is not only in compiling and providing the data but also in having the skillsets to analyse and correctly interpret the data. UNECE leadership is essential in driving the modernisation agenda and facilitating collaboration between different stakeholders for sharing of knowledge and tools, breaking silos, and advocating for use of various data sources, including administrative sources.

18. Mr. Jensen noted the long-standing partnership and good cooperation of UNECE and the European Environment Agency on a number of projects related to environmental information and assessment. Over recent years there has been a constructive engagement process of international organizations such as UNECE, UNEP and EEA to bring their environmental assessment processes closer to ensure maximum synergy. The European region can be a showcase for the rest of the world on how to bring together a large number of diverse countries, and establish a well-governed environmental assessment process that combines strong country level input with thematic guidance from the international level. He emphasized that the collaborative model of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) could be followed in the monitoring of SDGs. Through SEIS, countries share environmental information and build a common understanding of the challenges to be addressed. Challenges will lie in having meaningful indicators, ensuring good governance of the SDG monitoring process, national buy-in in the reporting, and a good combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches in the SDG monitoring.

19. Mr. Velegrakis discussed what UNECE can do to support measuring and monitoring of the transport-related aspects of the SDGs. Transport is an essential component of sustainable development as transport links are an important facilitator of global trade and a prerequisite for socio-economic development. Significant changes in future global population and household size, age structure, and urbanization will have substantial implications for transport patterns, energy use and Greenhouse Gas emissions. Working towards sustainable transport systems requires all aspects of sustainable development to be considered. He noted two UNECE initiatives that are of relevance in this context: a study on 'Transport for Sustainable Development – the Case of Inland Transport' and the ForFITS (For Future Inland Transport Systems) tool which allows to assess the evolution of future transport-related CO2 emissions under different assumptions and policy scenarios. Mr. Velegrakis also noted that relatively little attention has been paid until now to the assessment of climate change impacts on transport infrastructure and adaptation measures while weather conditions may have very significant implications for transport. Recent developments in geo-spatial information and the development of specialised tools to simulate the future effects of particular policies can greatly assist in tracking progress and formulating effective policies.

20. In the discussion from the floor the following points were raised:

(a) The availability of statistics is crucial for evidence-based policy decisions. The SDG measurement system should be balanced between the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. The cross-cutting targets are especially challenging to measure. UNECE can play an important leadership role in facilitating the required interdisciplinary and interministerial cooperation;

(b) It was stressed that the monitoring framework for SDGs should be built on existing frameworks and already established systems for monitoring and accountability. Several speakers mentioned the *CES Recommendations for measuring sustainable development* as a valuable framework in this regard, which has taken into account the many initiatives of countries and international organizations on measuring sustainable development;

(c) The importance of establishing and implementing a single, over-arching monitoring, accountability and review framework for the SDGs was emphasized. The framework should cover all aspects of the SDGs and all means of implementation, including financing. This framework should operate at national, regional and global levels, overseen by the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. It should be supported by a core set of effective, meaningful, results-oriented indicators, which should be gender- and age-sensitive;

(d) UNECE could stimulate discussion on the importance of strong institutions and good governance for an efficient process of measuring and monitoring SDGs;

(e) More comprehensive indicators in areas such as health, education, employment and financial sustainability were called for, as well as more cross-cutting indicators. However, caution was expressed about having too many indicators, and indicators that are impractical.

(f) There was a call for the targets under the SDGs to be achievable, measurable and meaningful;

(g) The importance of transport issues being reflected in the SDG framework was noted. Countries were encouraged to provide information for the ForFITS model and to use it for providing information on climate impacts of transport;

(h) The importance of the regional dimension in measuring and monitoring sustainable development was stressed in several interventions. It is important to have indicators taking into account the regional circumstances to address regional policy priorities. The regional level could provide a useful forum for peer reviews, exchange of experience, ensuring progress on transboundary issues and encourage countries to set ambitious targets and stimulate implementation;

(i) UNECE can be a platform for experimenting on how to use the new data sources, how to produce preliminary estimates needed in the context of post-2015 agenda, and how to work with analytical and policy experts to use modelling approaches to improve the usefulness and timeliness of data. In that context, CES could play a leadership role;

(j) The work of Regional Commissions should be taken into account in developing the global set of indicators;

(k) The importance of using geospatial data for providing an evidence base, measuring and monitoring of the SDGs was emphasized.

Annex I.

High-level statement on the post-2015 development agenda and expected sustainable development goals in the ECE region (E/ECE/1475)

1. The seventieth anniversary of the United Nations in 2015 is a milestone for international and regional cooperation. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the significant transitions the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region has gone through during that period and the new challenges and opportunities it is facing in an increasingly globalized world. Gathered together as member States for the sixty-sixth session of ECE, we are unified in our commitment to the implementation of an ambitious programme for sustainable development in the region.

2. ECE has 56 member States that geographically cover a large portion of the northern hemisphere and economies that account for about half of the global combined gross domestic product. Our region brings together economically advanced countries with developing countries and has experienced a time of unprecedented economic development and prosperity over the past decades. However, all have also faced economic, social and environmental challenges in recent years and are focused on the necessary transformations to realize and strengthen economic growth, job creation and environmental sustainability.

3. ECE has proved itself to be an important factor in these developments as a results-driven organization that develops best practices and standards and services agreements that serve as catalysts for action in its member States and around the world. ECE is ideally placed to continue to make a strong contribution to sustainable development by:

(a) Increasing connectivity, which is essential for sustainable development in today's world and to maximize the benefits of globalization. To accomplish this, ECE will further strengthen and ensure the implementation of the 58 United Nations land-transport agreements to promote affordable, safe, clean, efficient and well integrated inland transport systems and policies; further contribute to efficient border crossing facilitation and international freight transport; and continue developing vehicle regulations and standards to promote road safety, energy efficiency and intelligent transport systems;

(b) Strengthening the sustainable management of ecosystems and natural resources, by managing and developing its 5 multilateral environmental conventions and 12 protocols, including on air pollution, transboundary water protection and use, industrial accidents, environmental impact assessment and public access to information; and, in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, ECE contributes to the sustainable management of forests in the region and fosters the contribution of forests to a green economy;

(c) Improving competitiveness by continuing its support to public-private partnerships, entrepreneurship and innovation that will help to further mobilize private resources, promote corporate responsibility, and advance a knowledge-based innovation economy; by further developing, maintaining and supporting the implementation of its numerous international standards and recommendations that facilitate global trade, including the codes and lingua franca that are the backbone of electronic business and trade, and more than 100 international agricultural quality standards, which contribute to the increased efficiency of trade and economic integration in the region;

(d) Supporting sustainable energy and resilient communities, including through energy standards, such as the ECE international resources classifications, best practices for

coal mine methane management and cleaner electricity production from fossil fuels and natural gas, mapping concrete measures and the promoting of technologies and standards to significantly improve renewable energy and energy efficiency, and the development of smart grids in the region. ECE will also continue to develop effective tools and recommendations to sustainable urban development, smart cities, land management and administration, and energy efficient housing;

(e) Contributing to an effective framework to measure and monitor sustainable development by developing high-quality data and modern statistical production building on the more than 20 statistical standards adopted by the Conference of European Statisticians, including indicators for measuring poverty, demographic changes and gender equality issues, and recommendations to measure sustainable development that help national statistical offices to produce and analyse data. The ECE environmental performance reviews are a valuable and well recognized monitoring mechanism. This experience can contribute toward an effective framework for monitoring and accountability.

4. Across these various sectors, ECE embraces a multistakeholder approach and will remain committed to creating and facilitating engagements and partnerships between experts from governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations. ECE will also further mainstream gender in all its activities and promote the empowerment of women.

5. As ECE member States, we are committed to sustainable development from the local to the global level. In line with the universal character of the post-2015 development agenda, the sustainable development goals will be global while implementation will be largely the responsibility of individual countries. As such, the regional commissions can play an important bridging role and ECE has the commitment and experience to help implement in the region, within its agreed mandate, this agenda for sustainable development for current and future generations. With this vision in mind, ECE will build on its unique experience and expertise in different aspects of sustainable development, further its efforts to promote linkages between different aspects of the Commission's work, and strengthen its cross-sectoral activities.